

April 16, 2019

Dr. Penny Schwinn, Commissioner
Tennessee Department of Education
710 James Robertson Parkway
Nashville, TN 37243

Dear Commissioner Schwinn:

We, the undersigned charter school leaders, thank you, Governor Lee, and the legislature for your consideration of the Priority School State Grant (PSG) funding. We remain deeply committed to the Achievement School District's (ASD) mission of transforming neighborhood schools, and these funds serve as an important support to ensure that we can achieve our collective goal.

Given the impact of this grant on our daily work, we wanted to provide you with some context as to why this grant is critical to our success in the ASD. ASD schools serve a disproportionately high number of students with special needs, as well as a large number of students with significant cognitive challenges. Currently, Tennessee districts currently receive less funding for special education than do nearby states. Additionally, funds do not follow children to the school: those with many or severely disabled students receive the same per pupil funds as those with few or the typically abled. *Our IDEA plus the special education portion of BEP cover approximately 40% of the \$9 million in ASD special education needs annually.*

Until 2016, we relied on philanthropic funding to provide appropriate services to our special needs students. In 2016-2017, ASD operators and our philanthropic partners worked with Governor Haslam and legislative leaders to establish state funds for special needs. This resulted in approval of a \$10 million Priority Schools Grant, with approximately \$3 million directed to special education in the ASD. ASD operators collaborated to create a Special Education Tiered Funding Formula that set aside approximately 3% of our BEP funds to properly fund our highest need students. And collectively, we agreed that 100% of our Priority Schools Grant should supplement these needs as well as address costs for mild and moderate needs.

In 2018, after the full grant was approved by the legislature, nearly 20% of the funds were diverted to support other initiatives, such as principal incentive pay. When we learned of this adjustment in July, we asked Commissioner McQueen to refrain from diverting critical funds for special education students, as it could destabilize our progress. The ASD schools with large populations of mild and moderate need special education students took a "leap of faith" in committing to renew the tiered funding model, in part, with the expectation that the Priority School Grant would help offset their contributions to the model. To illustrate impact, one operator received \$225,000 less in funding than the prior year as a result of this reallocation.

At this time, we understand that the Priority School Grant is again proposed in the state budget, but the allocation is cut in half to \$5 million. *Our hope is that the General Assembly will support the full funding of the Priority School Grant this session, and that - whatever total is budgeted - the Department will allocate at least \$3 million to the ASD special education model.* Our model has enabled us to create centers of excellence for special education in the ASD and for adequate dollars to follow children to the

programs that fit them best. We look forward to the opportunity to work with Department and ASD leaders to continue this work for our most vulnerable students with the full allocation of the Priority School Grant. We would be happy to discuss our request in further detail at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Bob Nardo, Libertas School of Memphis
Nickalous Manning, Aspire Memphis
Drew Sipple, Capstone Education Group
Bobby White, Frayser Community Schools
Kendra Ferguson, KIPP Memphis Collegiate Schools
Megan Quaile, Green Dot Public Schools Tennessee
Dwayne Tucker, LEAD Public Schools
James Dennis, Memphis Scholars
Marty McGreal, Pathways In Education
Tom Beazley, Promise Academies

CC: Sharon Griffin, Achievement School District